DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 211 EC 307 846

AUTHOR	Seifert, Kelvin L.
TITLE	Extremes of Inclusion: Too Much, Too Little.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Techniques; *Disabilities; Foreign Countries; *Inclusive Schools; *Interpersonal Competence; Peer Acceptance; *Peer Relationship; Primary Education; *Social Development; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS	Seven Oaks School Division Number 10 MB

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the inclusion of two children (age 7) in a general education classroom to illustrate the concepts of under inclusion and over inclusion. One child, who was found to be under included, rarely played with classmates on the playground and during "choice time" in class spent most of his time watching other children work or play. He watched others play checkers but rarely played the game himself and periodically would complain about never getting a turn at checkers, to which current players gave complicated reasons for his having to wait his turn. The other child was found to be over included. She was one of the most popular students in the class, was never alone on the playground, and could always be found standing or walking about, surrounded by a loosely defined circle of girls. The attention, however, was not always good for her, socially or academically. Strategies, including a group activity called "readers' circle", used by the teacher to moderate the extremes of under inclusion and over inclusion are discussed. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED 442 211

Extremes of Inclusion: Too Much, Too Little

Kelvin L. Seifert[1]
University of Manitoba

Seifert

Prologue: A Tale of Two Children

Let me start with two children, Amy and Eric, in a "happy," well-run primary-level class. The children, both age seven, are the beneficiaries of an experienced, discerning teacher. Both children are coping well with the academic and social demands of the classroom community of learners. It is the spring of the school year, and so both children are well known to their peers. They are both included in basic classroom activities by their classmates, as well as by the teacher. All seems to be well; it is a "good" class, taught by a "good" teacher and full of "good" students. Every individual child seems included and reasonably content.

And let me also start where my impressions of Amy and Eric ended up: neither child seems fully happy. Discontent is not obvious at first glance: each child smiles frequently, talks to others, interacts with me freely and with apparent confidence. I visit the class for several weeks, in fact, without suspecting that either is anything less than completely satisfied with their school life. Nothing seems immediately odd about their behavior, and neither child mopes about, fights with others, or avoids classmates in any obvious way. Both sit and work, or at least appear to work, when the teacher expects them to work. I do note, though, that the quality of their work is vastly different. The reading and writing done by Amy, for example, is well above the average for the class academically, and that done by Eric is below the average. Yet the academic difference does not affect their social relationships or general classroom behavior in any obvious or direct ways. Eventually I

---

1 The author wishes to thank the teachers of the Seven Oaks School Division, as well as Coralie Bryant, superintendent of the division, for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. Please address all correspondence to Dr. Kelvin Seifert, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2.

EC 307846

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

do come to see connections between their social and academic successes, but the ties are subtle, indirect, and a bit ambiguous. But overall, even with careful observation over several weeks, each child seems to "fit in"–yet to remain slightly dissatisfied with their place in the class and in the eyes of others.

The problem, I will come to believe, is that one child is "underincluded" in the life of the class, while the other is "overincluded." Eventually, that is, it will seem to me that for all their similar cheerfulness, Eric lives on the fringes of this classroom community, while Amy is often trapped by a tangle of social expectations. Belonging will therefore be a problem for both, but in very different senses. For one, inclusion remains a dream which is difficult to attain, whereas for the other it settles all too heavily on the daily, events of school, actually limiting freedom of choice rather than facilitating it.

But I get ahead of myself. Since *underinclusion* and *overinclusion* are not everyday terms, they need explanation, along with the experiences which led me to formulate them. *Underinclusion* is the easier of the two to grasp. Many teachers will agree that some children are confined to the margins of classroom life unless the teacher takes steps to involve them. Such intervention is in fact what "inclusive education" is all about. But what about the converse to this widely supported virtue? Could inclusion actually be overdone for particular children? What would a case of "overinclusion" look like? Answering the first question requires a brief side excursion into current educational thinking about inclusive education. Answering the second question requires looking again at my observations of Eric and Amy, in the light of current thinking about inclusive education.

Ideas of *Inclusion* Among Educators

Inclusion, or making all students part of classroom life, really has to do with compensating for marginality. In general, for example, educators use the concept is to talk about students with disabilities (Putnam, 1998; Friend, 1999), or about students of non-white backgrounds (Banks, 1999), or about girls and women in education (Luke, 1996). These students have all been "excluded" to greater or lesser extents when viewed in the broad context of society's values and practices. Inclusion is the philosophy and teaching practices designed to remedy these inequities. For marginalized students, therefore, it seems unlikely that inclusive education could ever be overdone or ever become too much of a good thing: there are always ways to make schooling more fair to students with disabilities, to non-whites, and to girls and women. For these groups and individuals, inclusion is broadly equivalent to maximizing students' involvement.

But could the goal of "maximum involvement" ever hurt a student, the classroom, or both? Suppose a teacher has a student who already experiences significant success academically and socially; should the teacher strive to increase that student's involvement still further? The answer here is not simple or obvious. On the one hand, surely no one can ever have too many friends or experience too much success academically! On the other hand, "maximizing involvement" may mean giving ever greater influence to students and classmates. It may mean lots of self-directed activities and choices, for example, as well as generous amounts of cooperative small group projects, in which students manage their own relationships and tasks to a large degree. Should this be allowed to develop and expand indefinitely? Or will expansion beyond some limit lead to what Elizabeth Cohen (1994), among others, has pointed out: that students will reproduce the wider society's social and academic biases without the teacher's even knowing they are doing so? If social reproduction is a

danger rather than an opportunity, then teachers who borrow the idea of *inclusion* for their "regular" classrooms may need to do something counterintuitive: they may need to limit certain forms of involvement by certain students, in the interests of enhancing it for others.

As a teacher and educator with years of (marginal!) involvement in inclusive education, I found these possibilities troubling. The practical issue, it seemed to me, came down to this: How could I, or any teacher, promote inclusion for my entire class, and not just for the students designated officially as "special needs"? What might the term *inclusion* mean not only for a child at risk for failure, but also for a child "at risk" for success? It was in posing these questions that my experiences with Amy and Eric began to make sense. These two children offered me preliminary answers, though not quite the ones I expected.

Searching for Inclusion Among the Already Included

As part of a larger program of research about classroom communities, I devoted more than two months to participating and observing a classroom at one particular elementary school, which I will call Parkside School. Just arriving at Parkside each day created a light, hopeful feeling: the building was new, the homes were new and middle-income or above, the children looked well-clothed and well-fed. Compared to teachers in many neighborhoods, the teachers serving Parkside could assume stable family environments for most students. They could also assume parents who spoke English as their first language, who were able and motivated to attend parent meetings, and who felt confident in talking with teachers. Few children were non-white, only a modest number had single-parents or step-parents; and special educational needs were generally mild and few in number (compared, again, to many other schools). On the surface, these factors promised me a school where

inclusion would be more feasible and successful. My first field notes, in fact, were filled with worries about whether Parkside and its children could give me "anything to observe." The teachers, parents, and students all seemed already and always to be a happy, inclusive lot. I saw few rifts or problems which might offer "newsworthy" material for qualitative research articles like this one.

Ironically, the teacher, Ann, added to my initial worry by her sheer competence. Ann was a calm, thoughtful host: she looked straight at whomever was speaking, whether me or a child, and measured her comments carefully in every discussion or situation. Thanks apparently to years of classroom experience, she rarely asserted her will strongly or directly in class. When children arrived, for example, they moved immediately into "choice time," and Ann was a scarcely noticeable presence in this transition. Even when she called the group together deliberately later in the morning, the transition often seemed automatic; I missed the signal (the clock? a word from Ann?) that triggered the change. Ann was a strong believer in inclusion. Yet her attitude was not the main reason I chose to work with her, so much as her reputation for self-confidence in the presence of visitors and her commitment to teaching as a profession. The fact that she happened to work in a relatively problem-free, middle-class school was accidental in my choice–and as I have mentioned, it seemed downright unfortunate for my purposes as first.

Nonetheless, I faithfully participated in and observed in Ann's classroom over a nine-week period, from late April through the last week of classes at the very end of June. Each week I came to Parkside for 10-12 hours, the time divided among parts of various days. I rarely led class activities, though I did assist frequently with individual children's academic work and recreation. But my real purposes were not curricular as such: I focused rather on children's social encounters, and

especially on evidence of individuals' being included in or excluded from the life of the class. For this purpose I made sure to observe a sample of all possible classroom activities, whether teacher-led or child-initiated. After a few weeks, I also interviewed each child individually about his or her preferred play- and work-mates. I also spent increasing amounts of time "hanging around" the playground during recesses and talking with children, as I slowly concluded that much inclusion and exclusion occurred during these unsupervised times, outside the usual scrutiny and control of the teacher. For the same reason, my observations gradually emphasized child-initiated periods of the classroom day, since these offered more clues than teacher-led periods about children's relationships with each other.

Throughout the project I kept detailed, descriptive field notes of all observations. In spite of my initial fears of "nothing to observe," I accumulated 225 pages of type-written notes by the end of the study. The were never written in class, but in the school library, where I went every hour or so to type. Interspersing observation and note taking this frequently insured fresh memories and therefore longer, more detailed notes, as well as interim revisions in my observation plans when prior observations suggested the need. Once completed, I reviewed the corpus of field notes repeated, looking for concepts and themes related to my initial questions. I looked in particular for evidence about the nature and complexities of inclusion, as well as about the possibility that inclusion might have mixed and different effects on individual children. My motivation was primarily to think more deeply about inclusion, but I also wanted to share my insights with others eventually; so I was careful to follow established guidelines for rendering qualitative observations as valid and reliable as possible (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

Results: Inclusion Hoped For and Feared

In general, and in spite of Ann's efforts to involve all students in the class, individuals varied widely in how and when they were included in social and academic activities. This trend was not surprising, since individual differences are hardly unusual in education and psychology. What is more significant is the impact of both extremes: social and academic dissatisfaction was experienced not just by the least included students, but also by the most included ones as well. Eric and Amy, whom I began describing earlier, illustrate this idea.

Eric: Underinclusion Eric was clearly struggling, socially and academically. He had joined the class relatively recently, and therefore coped with finding a place for himself among already existing relationships. On the playground, Eric rarely played with classmates, either at sports or by simply chatting with them. During the relatively free "choice time" in class each day, Eric spent most of his time watching other children work or play, discussing their activities with them rather than ever doing the activities himself. He watched others play checkers on numerous occasions, for example, but rarely played the game himself. Periodically he would complain about never getting a turn at checkers, to which current players gave complicated reasons (or rationalizations?) For his having perennially to wait his turn. One day he finally succeeded at getting a turn, in fact, only by cheating at the sign-up system for turn-taking which the children had instituted, with some assistance from the teacher. Other, more dominant checker players detected his ploy, and reported it to the teacher. Needless to say, the incident (and others like it) did not endear him to classmates, who complained to me about them during the sociometric interviews. Nonetheless, thanks in part to actions by the

teacher like the ones noted below, Eric was far from a complete outcast. Classmates did include him in most academic projects, if not in social activities.

Amy: Overinclusion Amy was one of the most popular students in the class, both socially and academically. In sociometric interviews, she received one of the largest number of votes (7 out of 23) as a "preferred workmate" for academic activities, and several classmates also indicated that they considered themselves generally "very similar" to Amy, and chose her as their best friend. On the playground, Amy was never alone, and could be always found standing or walking about, surrounded by a loosely defined circle of girls. All was not well, however, with Amy's place in these relationships. No girl expressed dislike of Amy directly, but several expressed strong dislike of Amy's "other" friends–i.e. of classmates when they competed for Amy's attention. The jealousies were both social and academic (being Amy's companion at recess, being her reading partner in class). Amy herself never commented on the jealousies, nor tried to resolve them; whenever they were expressed openly, in fact, she simply grew silent and waited for others to resolve their conflicts among themselves. In this regard she resembled the leaders of social cliques observed in older, pre-adolescent children (Adler and Adler, 1998), who sometimes maintain their status by allowing others to criticize and fight with each other, rather than with the leader directly.

Overall, Amy was the object of much attention, and in this sense was one of the most "included" students. Yet in my own judgment, the attention was not always good for her, socially or academically. Girls who succeeded in collaborating with Amy academically, for example, were not necessarily able to assist Amy in return. One girl who was especially keen on being a partner for academic activities, for example, was also capable academically, but significantly less motivated than

Amy. In accepting this particular girl's overtures, therefore, Amy paid a price. She risked creating jealousies that among peers, and she lost chances for being fully challenged academically.

Ann: Moderating The Extremes of Underinclusion and Overinclusion Substantial variations in levels of inclusion, like these, emerged when children were observed over the nine weeks of the study. Some children were much more at the center of classroom life than were others. At one extreme, a few scarcely talked to classmates or participated in joint activities, at the cost of benefitting from others' learning and social support. At the other extreme, a few others could not escape socializing or working with certain others, even if they wanted to, and even though it sometimes triggered conflict or a suboptimal academic environment. Some children lacked involvement, while others lacked privacy; and when examined closely, neither extreme was necessarily "happier" or more educative for a child.

But excessive and insufficient inclusion were mitigated by the teacher, especially for academic activities. Space does not let me describe all of her ways for doing so, but take as an example a small group activity called "readers' circle," in which children produced skits of particular books and presented them to the class. Ann managed this activity so that every child was guaranteed a place somewhere in one of the readers' groups. She did so, however, not by forming the groups around individuals' social or academic preferences, but around individuals' anonymous choices of books. Children could not ask to work with their friends, in other words, or even to work with the academically best students. Instead they were invited simply to indicate which of several books they would prefer to study and to present to the class, and any individuals choosing the same book in common became a group. This strategy reduced competition for access to popular students (the

overincluded), and at the same time insured participation by the less popular students (the underincluded).

On the other hand, Ann did not fully succeed at equalizing all differences in inclusion. Because of her focus on the curriculum and the classroom setting, in particular, she could not monitor children's social life effectively on the playground. Yet as other teachers and observers before me have found, I saw clearly that these unsupervised times directly influenced students' social success, and perhaps therefore even their academic success indirectly (Sutton-Smith, 1997). At recess, children governed each other's access to games and social groups, justifying permissions and denials in a variety of ways that were not necessarily fair or relevant. Even in the classroom, Ann could not monitor all interactions when students worked in self-directing groups, such as the readers' circle – mentioned above; problematic interactions and conflicts occurred regularly. Ann coached children to resolve these on their own as much as possible, but the damage to relationships and to sense of belonging had often been done by the time a conflict came to her attention, so that she could urge individuals to discuss and resolve it.

Educational Significance

The findings imply three points. First, they suggest an important refinement to the notion of inclusion: that because it can involve costs, it may need to be optimal rather than extreme. Half of this idea is already widely accepted, as noted earlier, because progressively minded educators generally agree that some children are indeed included too little in the work and social life of a classroom. But the converse idea may be harder to accept, and may therefore merit further investigations–that some children may be included too much in a classroom, included to an extent that

actually limits academic work or social options. Judging by my observations, educators' goals should not be simply to encourage social and academic inclusion pure and simple, but to encourage it in appropriate amounts and forms. For some students in some situations, optimizing inclusion may mean strategies that seem counterintuitive–strategies of actually preventing collaboration of a student with particular peers in particular situations, in order to facilitate the student's learning or social development.

Second, the idea of optimal inclusion should be seen as a more general expression of "least restrictive environment" (LRE), a concept basic to special education. LRE refers to modifications in learning environments made for students with special educational needs, and to the fact that the modifications may involve a mixture of "inclusion" (e.g time in a regular classroom) and deliberate, therapeutic "exclusion" (e.g. time for individual tutorial help). Unlike the concept of LRE, however, the notion of optimal inclusion refers to a need in all students for the most effective forms and levels of social and academic participation. These may be different from the highest possible amounts of participation, a point that Robert Slavin (1996) has made in reviewing the general effects of cooperative learning in the context of general (not special) education.

Third, the observations suggest that teachers can help create optimal inclusion, even if they cannot guarantee it fully. Numerous teaching strategies (such as those commonly regarded as promoting "classroom democracy") are helpful in limiting inequities that originate in the free interactions of peers. As other teachers have found, a challenge for all of us is to discover exactly how much and when to use such strategies, and to discern when the strategies truly optimize inclusion for individuals (Hole, 1998). Too much intervention, whether led by the teacher or by students

themselves, may sometimes limit students' freedom of action, and therefore limit motivation and learning. Yet too little intervention by the teacher can support peer influence so much that students reproduce over- and underinclusion. For the sake of equity, teachers need to find a balance that truly moderates inclusion–and research on teaching may be able to help in that search.

Epilogue: Two Children Revisited

Back to my story. I have been visiting Parkside School for four weeks, and today I am outdoors during morning recess. The children are scattered over a wide area, mostly in groups of various sizes. But Eric is nearby by himself, kicking a soccer ball against a wall of the school.

"I like it better over here," he says to me. "I can have the ball as often as I like." He nods toward the field where most of the boys have formed teams and are playing soccer. "I can get good at it here; kick it [the ball] a lot for practice. Then I'll be so good at soccer that they won't dare yell at me." He glances out at the teams again, to explain who "they" are. Apparently it does not occur to him to consider spending recess with girls or with other male "loners," most of whom are doing activities that are quieter or non-competitive. His mind is set on team dynamics, and on what team work means about acceptance and respect.

After weeks of visiting Eric's class, I am just starting to suspect that Eric may often feel excluded. I ask, "Doesn't the teacher (Ann) make sure that everyone gets to play?"

"Umm, sometimes. But not much out here," he replies, his voice trailing off. But then he brightens and adds, "She's a good teacher." He looks straight at me and smiles. "But even when she makes us be fair, some kids are still not fair. Like we're supposed let any kid play soccer. But

sometimes they still don't–they act like they don't even see you standing there. Or they only let you play when the para [i.e. the assistant teacher] is actually there, too, watching the game."

"But isn't that better than nothing?" I ask. Eric nods yes. In spite of his complaints, he is not a rebel against the teacher or the classroom system. At least not yet. He still hopes for inclusion, and believes that he will achieve it some day through effort, and maybe with a bit of help from his teacher, Ann.

Meanwhile, during the same recess, Amy is ambling slowly around the playground. As commonly happens, she is with several girls, and they are chatting. Everyone looks happy. Then I see another girl who is less well liked, Kyla, run toward the group. Kyla wedges her way to the center of the group, taking a spot directly at Amy's elbow. Two of the original group break off when this happens; now they are walking in my general direction, pouting, annoyed, and talking to each other. They happen to cross in front of Eric and his kickball, but neither he nor they notice each other.

"What's up?" I ask the girls.

"Kyla's always doing that," says one. "She always grabs Amy's attention, and then Amy won't play with us."

"Can't you all play together?" I ask.

"No, Kyla won't let us!"

Something doesn't add up about this conflict. "What does Amy say about it?" I ask.

"Nothing," they say. "She just goes on playing with whoever is there." It doesn't seem to occur to them that Amy may also exercise choice simply by keeping silent. Nor does it occur that

Amy may actually feel "hounded" or confused by a surplus of friends and by competition for her attention.

"But at least that doesn't happen indoors," I offer, trying to defuse potential scape-goating of Kyla. "Don't you have to work with lots of different people in the room?" The girls nod yes, though reluctantly. Although they admit to my point, they are also afraid that I am missing theirs. They want me to see that self-chosen friendships, like those formed on the playground, are uniquely important, no matter how much fairness the teacher enforces about cooperative academic work. I wonder to myself, while looking at these two annoyed girls, what Amy might think about the girls' point. Does she value inclusion as much as these two girls seem to value it? Or is Amy too busy coping with popularity to consider this question?

References

Adler, Patricia and Adler, Peter. (1998). *Peer power: Preadolescent culture and identity.* New Brunswik, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Banks, J. (1999). *Introduction to multicultural education. (2nd ed.).* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Cohen, E. (1994). *Designing group work: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom, 2nd ed.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Friend, M., and Bursuck, W. (1999). *Including students with special needs (2nd ed.).* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Hole, S. (1998). Teacher as rain dancer. In *Harvard Educational Review, 68*(2), 413-421.

Luke, C. (Ed.). (1996). *Feminisms and pedagogies of everyday life.* Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Putnam, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Cooperative learning and strategies for inclusion: Celebrating diversity in the classroom (2nd ed.).* Baltimore, MD: P. H. Brookes.

Slavin, R. (1996). Research on cooperative learning and achievement: What we know, what we need to know. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 21,* 43-69.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, S. and Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods, 3rd ed.* New York: Wiley.